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ABSTRACT

The lead article of this pamphlet examines means of motivating public school (especially high school) students to accept greater academic challenge, without relying on budget increases. Measures being applied in school systems nationwide include special diplomas for students who meet exceptional standards in prescribed curricula; "weighted grading" systems that make difficult courses more attractive by raising their grade-point values; in elementary schools, stricter retention/promotion policies based on learning objectives, with remedial programs for retained students; greater academic eligibility requirements for extracurricular activities, with assistance for students who have trouble meeting the requirements; flexible but well-enforced attendance policies; more frequent homework assignments; and finally, awards and/or public recognition for a variety of student achievements. Other brief articles discuss (1) the role of public schools in helping students prepare for the Scholastic Aptitude Test; (2) ways to encourage teachers to identify and report child abuse; and (3) prohibition of firearms in schools. (MCG)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 15/Number 2/February 1984

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Raise expectations to achieve excellence

Excellence is in. Mediocrity is out. Any educators or school board members who don't agree must have spent the last ten months on another planet. Since last spring's unveiling of the Commission on Educational Excellence report—and the several others that followed—educational leaders, government officials, business leaders, parents, students, and the press haven't missed many opportunities to comment on why and how the educational process should be improved.

Improved. That's the key word to keep in mind. While current criticism of education is harsh, it shouldn't be taken as a mandate to start from scratch. Most school systems already are providing the learning opportunities students need to meet the academic standards being proposed. What school systems could do more, however, is encourage students to accept challenges and reward them when they do. Changing attitudes will take time. But, it won't necessarily require the increased funding attached to most recommended reforms.

Avoid penalizing students

State boards of education are mandating that students study more math, science, and other academic subjects by increasing minimum graduation requirements. Some states and local school systems also are offering special diplomas for students who meet even higher academic standards. In Virginia, students can receive a governor's seal diploma for completing 22 credits from a prescribed curriculum with a minimum 3.0 grade point average. The Port Huron (Mich.) Area School District (K-12; 14,574 students) is offering a "scholar's diploma" to students who earn a 3.5 GPA in a designated academic curriculum. But, will a governor's seal, or even a 14-carat gold diploma, challenge those students who want to play it safe?

Grade-point averages and class rank continue to carry substantial weight in the college admissions process. Students who are qualified to take a high-level course often will opt for an easy "A" in a less challenging class to preserve a high GPA and class rank. These students may be rewarded by acceptance to the college of their choice. Unfortunately, they aren't being challenged to their full potential.

Directing that all students be assigned to classes suited to their ability, however, isn't the best solution. Telling students who may earn a "B" in an honors course, but an "A" in a standard course, that the challenge is for their own good isn't enough. Although many college admissions officers say they do assess the level of difficulty of an applicant's high school classes, especially for borderline students, a personalized admissions process isn't standard. GPA, class rank, and SAT scores usually are looked at first.

Weighted grading may be the fairest and most practical solution. Students are encouraged to take more challenging classes because their GPA and class rank can be protected. The Fredonia (Wisc.) School District (K-12; 887 students) is implementing weighted grading this year. Students enrolled in fourteen identified courses at Fredonia's Ozaukee High School will receive "power points" to be used in determining the student's GPA. Nine of the identified courses qualify for an additional half-point, and the remaining five will have a full point added to the final grade.

Most school systems using weighted grading limit its application to academic subjects. In an attempt to challenge those students not planning to go to college, several of Ozaukee High School's vocational courses also are included in the program.

School systems usually consider implementing a weighted grading policy when parents and students apply pressure. If complaints about your grading practices haven't surfaced yet, however, you have an opportunity to provide leadership in the drive toward educational excellence. But, don't plunge forward with a new policy before you get input from parents, students, and instructional staff. Involve them in the process of identifying those courses that deserve weighted grading. You also might share your plans with several colleges and universities to discover how your system will coordinate or conflict with their admissions procedures.

Monitor learning

Although most criticism of public education in recent months has focused on secondary education, the foundation established in elementary grades is directly related. Educators know that students who are not challenged in early grades, who do not develop good study habits, who are not accustomed to doing homework or attending school regularly, and who are promoted based on age and parental pressure rather than on evidence of learning will have a difficult time meeting stricter standards in high school.

Effective policies on promotion and retention that are linked to achieving educational objectives will go a long way toward ensuring that students are

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prepared for the next educational level. Concerns about the emotional effect on students who are retained, or the wisdom of keeping physically mature students in elementary or intermediate grades, however, sometimes result in promotion/retention policies that don't have *learning* as their primary objective.

But, policies that are rigidly tied to achieving set learning objectives likely will result in student frustration and increased dropouts. Repetition alone often doesn't suffice to give students the help they need. Many school systems are combining their commitment to stricter promotion/retention standards with remediation programs that give students a better chance to learn what they need to know.

The Virginia Beach (Va.) School District (K-12; 55,830 students), for example, recently adopted a new promotion/retention policy for elementary grade students. Measurable objective criteria will be used to determine whether a student should be promoted or retained. The student's age, ability, special needs, social and work habits, and teacher input also will be considered. But, a student can be retained only once in a grade. The previous policy permitted only one retention throughout the elementary grades. Because an increase in retentions is anticipated, a remediation program is planned to help meet student needs.

Remediation programs don't have to cost a lot of money. In Washington, D.C., for example, a broad-based volunteer tutoring program provides thousands of hours of assistance. Other strategies are to use peer tutors, or to have older students assist younger ones. Providing parents with the know-how for helping their children is another useful approach.

The extracurricular carrot

Many school systems are pressuring students to spend more time on their studies by implementing stiffer academic eligibility requirements for participation in some or all extracurricular activities. The Los Angeles school system, for example, received nationwide media attention when it approved a new policy requiring students participating in extracurricular activities to maintain a "C" average—up from the previously acceptable "D"—with no failing marks. The policy, which was implemented in the 1982-83 school year, resulted in 5,881 high school students being barred from participation. The good news is that 28 percent of these students were motivated enough to regain their eligibility.

Those who favor such policies believe students will be better prepared for life after high school. Critics complain, however, that those students who meet their only school successes in sports or performing arts activities will drop out of school if they don't remain eligible for extracurricular activities.

Some school systems recognize that imposing eligibility requirements on students without helping them to meet the standards would be unfair. They are combining stricter eligibility standards with academic assistance programs to address this concern. The Mayville (Wisc.) School District (K-12; 1,304 students), for example, is providing tutoring for those students who receive one "F" or a grade point average below 1.3. Students who participate in the tutoring program retain their eligibility. Volunteer student tutors receive half of a credit for their work; some faculty members also tutor.

Athletic coaches in Seattle's South Central School District (PK-12; 1,582 students) were concerned about the study habits and academic performance of student athletes. Their concerns and their interest in addressing the development of the total person resulted in the "sports study table" program patterned after study programs available in many universities.

In South Central, the study tables are individualized by sport to coordinate the team practice schedules and numbers of students needing assistance. For example, the football study table meets three days a week from 7:00 to 7:55 A.M.; additional days are added as necessary. Any football player may attend, but any athlete not passing a class on a weekly basis or whose grade drops in a class is required to be there. Coaches take turns supervising the session. Students use the time to get specific help, do homework, study for exams, or to improve study habits. The results not only are improved grades, but also enhanced rapport and relationships between students and staff.

Increase learning opportunities

Your commitment to increasing learning opportunities doesn't necessarily have to take the form of longer school days or years. Instead, look to your policies on school attendance and homework for assistance.

Attendance policies typically explain why school attendance is important, define student and parent responsibility for school attendance, and state the consequences of poor attendance. In addition, flexibility is achieved by defining the kinds of absences that are considered *excused* and providing students with the means to make up missed work. It is advisable to develop or revise your policies regarding student attendance in cooperation with students, parents, and teachers. Rigid and unenforceable policies will serve neither the students nor the school system.

A currently popular and cost-efficient way of enforcing student attendance policies is to use computerized telephoning devices. A prerecorded message can be transmitted to parents of absent students by the computer; parents can be called during evening hours when they are more likely to be home. Although students are finding ways to sabotage the process ("Wrong number, Ma," is how one Stamford, Conn. student plans to explain the evening call.), the odds are that more

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Tips 'n Techniques

Ignoring child abuse is risky

You may not notice them, but you can be sure they're in your schools. Their cries for help are masked; they are reaching out when they appear to be turning away. They might be labeled hyperactive, learning disabled, behavior problems, or grouped in any number of categories. Many even go undetected because the scars they bear are emotional, not physical.

They are abused children. Unless they are promptly and accurately identified, more than 1,000 of these children will die next year nationwide according to American Humane Association (AHA) statistics. But, detecting abuse cases among school children can be a formidable task. It is not a responsibility school systems are eager to assume.

An insidious problem

Often, teachers tell principals about students who may be lacking proper care at home because the children aren't wearing coats on wintry days or they have holes in their shoes. Principals usually avoid involvement by explaining that the student is from a "poor" family. Historically, schools avoid involvement in situations that relate to a student's home life. Principals are not eager to "rock the domestic boat" by questioning a parent's chosen discipline methods or values. When a child's life is at risk, however, the stakes are high.

Battered children, or those who suffer nonaccidental physical injuries, perhaps are the easiest type of abused children to recognize. Their symptoms are visible as bruises, burns, and lacerations. According to Theresa Costello, staff associate with AHA, however, this group represents only one-fourth of all abused children. The "coatless" child, whose basic physical needs of food, clothing, shelter, or medical care are neglected, constitutes more than 60 percent of all reported cases of abuse. Emotional abuse, which is defined as excessive and aggressive parental behavior that places unreasonable demands on a child, accounts for roughly 12 percent of the total reported cases. Sexual abuse (rape, incest, fondling, and exhibitionism) represents close to 10 percent. The combined four-category total exceeds 100 percent due to cases of multiple abuse involving one child.

In 1974, over 412,000 cases of child abuse were reported nationwide. The following year, when the AHA became the official reporting agency for the federal government, 929,310 cases were logged—an increase of 125 percent. The figures jumped by another 16 percent in 1977, but the percent of increase has declined since then. Still, Costello estimates that at least two cases of child abuse go undetected for each that is reported.

A role for school systems

What can school officials do to narrow this gap? First, recognize that reporting child abuse no longer is just a moral responsibility; it is a legal one. Through enactment of P.L. 93-247, The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, the federal government calls for mandatory and prompt reporting and investigation of all suspected child abuse cases. Since 1974, all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and other jurisdictions such as Puerto Rico, have adopted similar laws.

While the details of these laws vary, one common element underlies all of them: Any person having *reasonable cause* to believe that a child is being abused or neglected must notify the prescribed intervention agency immediately. Failure to do so can result in the individual being held as an accomplice to the crime. Compliance guarantees immunity from civil and/or criminal liability.

Because teachers are with students for so many hours they necessarily have a major share of the responsibility for detection. But, teachers need school administration support. Professionals in the field of child protection suggest that schools can provide support by striving to:

- Encourage teachers to be comfortable about their judgments and their suspicions. Legal definitions should not take precedence over "gut feelings."
- Show concern for the rights of the child over those of the parents. Parents who genuinely have their children's best interest at heart will not consider this an infringement.
- Avoid making a teacher feel guilty for reporting in good faith a case that is dismissed upon investigation. At the very least, marginal cases tend to signal a need for help even if they do not meet the legal definition of child abuse.

Above all, teachers must know that identifying and reporting a case of child abuse will not be interpreted as interference in family affairs. Their responsibility is to identify a problem to make it possible for the child to grow and develop normally.

Guide through policy

By adopting a policy on reporting child abuse your school system establishes guidelines for handling the problem. As important, the school system publicly accepts its responsibility, in accordance with state law, to protect and help abused children.

But, caution is advised. Don't take on more responsibility than you should. Teachers, administrators, and others who work in the school system should do no more than report suspected abuse cases to the proper intervention agency. Professional counselors are equipped to deal with the range of situations involved in child

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Trends

To coach or not to coach

Interspersed among the more lively fantasies in the recent popular film *Risky Business* was the young leading man's dreaded nightmare: arriving too late to take the SAT.

Anxiety about the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is nothing new. It's likely that thousands of college-bound high school juniors and seniors have had that nightmare or one similar since the SAT debuted in 1926. But, arriving late isn't what students—and their parents—are worried about. The real concern is doing well enough on the test to meet the entrance standards of the college the student wants to attend.

To relieve that anxiety, students are willing to pay hundreds of dollars for coaching courses that supposedly will help them increase their scores.

Inconclusive evidence

Researchers haven't yet determined conclusively whether or not SAT coaching courses result in higher scores. In 1980, for example, Harvard University researchers announced that SAT scores could be raised by 40 to 85 points through intensive six-week coaching courses. In 1983, however, another study by Harvard researchers claimed that coaching produces negligible results—perhaps a gain of 10 points.

Conclusive or not, students seemingly would rather err on the side of overpreparation. "Cramming" for six weeks is a small price to pay for gaining a competitive edge. The question facing public school systems is whether SAT coaching should be left to the private sector or be provided by the schools.

School programs

More and more schools are providing coaching programs, often as a result of parental pressure. An in-school coaching program eliminates the need for students to travel long distances to a private coaching center. Also, it usually costs a lot less than a profit-making commercial course.

In most school systems where SAT coaching is available, the program is an extracurricular activity. The classes are taught by teachers, most often English, reading, and math specialists. But, some school systems are making arrangements with private firms to offer the commercial courses within the schools: the high fee remains the same, but the need for travel is eliminated. In still other cases, coaching classes are available through the community education program. This method keeps the course out of the regular school day—and the school budget, and responds to criticism that the schools are helping students beat the system.

SAT coaching programs provided by public schools can address concerns about equity—or lack of it. The lower cost and public school location gives all students equal opportunity to perform to the best of their ability. For those students still unable to pay the price, school systems can provide subsidies just as they help students obtain football uniforms or participate in field trips.

Test-taking skills

If there is consensus about any aspect of SAT coaching it is that students gain the most by strengthening their test-taking skills. Filling in the appropriate blank with a Number 2 pencil is not a new skill to be learned. But other, more complex, skills should be taught or reenforced. Many are skills that also should be taught as part of the regular curriculum.

For example, understanding and following directions is as essential for the elementary school student as it is for the college-bound high school student. What the SAT coaching program can provide, however, is the opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with the standard instructions and format. Familiarity is effective in relieving anxiety.

Standardized tests also require clear thinking. Students are advised to get a good night's sleep and eat a meal before a test; tiredness and hunger pangs can be damaging distractions.

Guessing skills also are important. Students need to know when they should trust their judgment and when to leave an answer blank. An SAT coach will make sure that students know they'll be penalized less for skipping a question than for answering incorrectly. Students also should be cautioned to check periodically that they are filling in the right blank; skipping questions can result in mismatched answers.

Tips about using allotted time wisely also are beneficial. Bringing a watch to the test session is good advice. Students who get bogged down in one section may not have enough time to do better in another section of the test. Most coaches advise students to move through the test at a steady pace and return to unanswered questions later. Another trick is to intersperse the reading comprehension section with short-answer questions. The break between reading passages can be refreshing and diminish confusion.

In addition to these test-taking skills most programs also provide refresher instruction in mathematics and language arts. Reviewing basic math concepts is especially important for those students who complete their formal math studies prior to taking the SAT.

Effective guidance counseling

Whether or not your school system provides SAT coaching, your guidance counselors should make sure that students and their parents know all they should about the exam. Students should be advised about what tests are

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parents will be contacted than before.

Assigning homework regularly is another way to increase time-on-task, but homework policies that prescribe amounts of homework are difficult to develop and enforce. It is hard to standardize a prescribed length of time for nightly homework because students have different abilities; one student might have to spend two hours on an assignment that takes another student 30 minutes.

But, length of time probably isn't as important as frequency of assignments and student perception that the assignments are worthwhile. In addition, students need to know that teachers will check the homework; teachers who simply check off whether an assignment was done won't know if learning is really taking place as a result of the assignment.

Another concern regarding homework is that a student could be overloaded on one night, and then go for the rest of the week with no homework. Principals and teachers can avoid this pitfall by establishing a procedure for staggering various assignments throughout the week.

Teachers also should remember that homework means work to be done away from the classroom. Frequently, teachers will permit students to start a homework assignment in class. Not only does this decrease classroom instructional time, but it also can result in students finishing the work in school and not having the opportunity to reenforce what they have learned or to develop good homework habits.

Recognize excellence

Not every student can be the class valedictorian or letter in football. Educators realize, however, that students crave recognition for whatever it is they do well. By making it possible for more students to be recognized for their achievements—whether it is for perfect school attendance, school service, or academic achievement—more students can be motivated to strive for excellence.

Through its Academic Excellence Awards program, the Nantucket (Mass.) School District (K-12; 818 students) recognizes students who are successful in one subject but aren't overall achievers. Criteria for the awards include an 85 percent average in a subject, a positive attitude, demonstrated responsibility, and a good relation with others. Students who show general improvement in these areas, but don't attain the minimum grade average, still are eligible for "improvement" awards. In the 1982-83 school year 31 students received academic excellence awards and 30 received improvement awards. Students also can receive more than one award; one student received five awards last year, and three students received three. Trophies are presented to the winning students at a special awards ceremony; Massachusetts Governor Dukakis was the presenter last year.

The ceremony becomes a community project through co-sponsorship of the program by the Nantucket School Committee and the Nantucket Teachers Association; attendance by parents and town officials; publicity in local newspapers; and a reception organized by the parents association and teachers. For the price of the trophies and, perhaps, an occasional speaker's fee, a large number of students receive a very public pat on the back.

More frequent recognition of student achievements can be done through a school system or individual school newsletter. Student of the day awards announced over the public address system can instill pride in students.

And, don't forget to recognize the achievements of teachers, too. The old maxim *success breeds success* works just as well for adults. ■

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available and which are required to meet individual student goals; many colleges require Achievement Tests in addition to the standard SAT. Students also need to know when the tests should be taken, and what options they have for taking the tests more than once.

Educational Testing Service publications about the SAT also should be available to students and parents seeking more information. In addition, guidance counselors should inform students about recent changes in ETS "truth in testing" practices which enable students to verify their scores and question the accuracy of "correct" answers.

Finally, make sure that *all* students know about SAT coaching programs available in school or privately. ■

School Leadership: 1984

To achieve educational excellence in their communities, school leaders need to be well informed and have the leadership skills necessary for moving forward. In response to that need, NSBA's Leadership Seminar, scheduled for May 4-5 in Las Vegas, offers two courses—"The Chemistry of Leadership" and "Fiscal Support." Both courses will give participants the opportunity to engage actively in hands-on activities designed to improve leadership skills.

In "The Chemistry of Leadership" you can learn what makes a good leader—and a good follower; the fundamentals of group dynamics; how to "sell" your ideas and negotiate positions; and leadership for community involvement and for managing change. "Fiscal Support" will help you put your leadership skills to work in determining fiscal priorities and gaining community support.

The faculty for both courses are Sam Sniderman, veteran school superintendent and deputy executive director of the Michigan Association of School Boards, and Ivan Wagner, noted educational administrator, school finance expert, and professor of education, administration, and supervision at Ball State University.

Seminar participation is limited on a first-come basis to assure individualized instruction. Information on registration and tuition (ask about the special discount for NSBA Direct Affiliates) is available from Nancy Dickinson, NSBA, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007, or call collect 202/337-7666.

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abuse.

School systems can help, however, by providing inservice training for school employees. Information on early warning signals, clarification of the law, and the role of school employees in reporting abuse cases is useful. Also, you should provide fair warning to parents through your public information program that it is the school system's policy to report suspected cases of child abuse. ■

policy Adviser

Can school policy prohibit visitors from carrying firearms in school buildings?—*Superintendent, Massachusetts.*

In some jurisdictions, the law may be on the side of the visitor with the firearm—if that person has a valid gun permit and isn't violating other laws. Nevertheless, you should have a policy prohibiting firearms on school property for two reasons.

First, the school system is responsible for the welfare and safety of all who use the schools. Second, disruptions to the school program need to be avoided. Although a good lawyer could argue that the welfare and safety of students wasn't in jeopardy in a particular situation, it is more than likely that attention would focus on a person visibly carrying a gun and, thus, disrupt the school program.

Adopting a policy is only the first step, however. Implementing procedures need to be practical and risk-free. Permitting the principal, for example, to search visitors for hidden weapons is neither.

When developing your policy, consider that most school systems that already have done so make exception, in writing, for law enforcement officers. Also, some state laws specify that school employees may use reasonable force to gain possession of a dangerous weapon. To develop a policy that is both in compliance with the law and enforceable the best advice is to consult with your local police authorities and with your school attorney. ■

Your help is needed

In an effort to provide school systems with the most comprehensive and timely school policy resources, NSBA editors are beginning work on revisions to the *EPS Reference Manual.*

As school leaders, you can help by:

- alerting us to policy topics that are of growing concern;
- informing us of changes to state law that require school systems to adopt new policies or to revise current policies;
- and, sending us copies of your new or revised policies.

Please send your suggestions, ideas, and/or copies of policies to Nancy Dickinson, School District Mangement Services, NSBA, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

For more policy help

Sample policies and a regulation relating to the topics covered in this month's *Updating* are included in the school administrator's copy of this publication. These are:

Educational Excellence: IKA, Grading Systems; IKB-R, Homework; JED, Student Absences and Excuses; JI, Student Awards and Scholarships.

Dangerous Weapons: JFCJ, Dangerous Weapons in the Schools.

Child Abuse: JHG*, Reporting Child Abuse.

Additional sample policies, regulations, or exhibits on these and other topics may be requested from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse, NSBA, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

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